

The Visionary and the Jumper
By Sonja Skippers

Sample Only

Chapter 1: Daniel

Deep in a hollow asteroid in the Goethe solar system, Daniel's sisters and mother rustled through the Christmas storage box for their favorite nativity sets and strings of lights in order to decorate their living quarters. Daniel, sitting nearby, placed a holly ornament on the Christmas tree, and then the creator God pulled Daniel into a vision.

Constellations shook free, rose from their orbits in the Milky Way and positioned themselves above the galaxy, at the Eye. The space between the stars filled and became four beasts. These creatures paced on top of the Milky Way, as if it were merely a disc of dirt or a shallow pool.

The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. Daniel watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it. The lion's wings were torn off.

The second beast looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'

The third beast looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

The first three beasts disappeared into constellations. Their stars were ripped apart by the fourth and final beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. The beast had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It differed from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns. This last beast, with the fewest sentient features, spoke to Daniel. He didn't understand the words, but the tone was boastful.

When Daniel came out of his vision, he was weak for two days. His

oldest sister, Magdalene, and his mother, Sherah, took care of him. The soft lights on the Christmas tree were like faint copies of the stars he'd seen, and he gazed at them as he rested on the couch while he thought about the galaxy and the animals in his vision.

At the next dinner he ate with his family, Daniel first concentrated on the little things. The rice was sweet and puffy. The pearl beans were creamy. Artificial gravity was working, so he poured water from a jug into an open cup with a scoop of powdered milk. Christmas rugs hung on the walls, covering the dark rock of the asteroid. The low ceiling made the room feel cozy today. Sometimes it felt claustrophobic.

"Did anything happen while I was in my vision?" Daniel asked his family. "Is there any news from Gospel of John?"

Sherah said, "No."

At the same time Daniel's youngest sister, Salamasina, yelled, "Yes," and punched a fist in the air. Hippolyte, the middle sister, pushed her fist down, but Salamasina shook herself free and dove for Daniel's lap.

"I missed you too." He smiled and held her on his lap, pushing her curls away from his face.

"I have news, but we can talk about it in private later," Sherah said.

"Why do you have to talk later when we already know about it," Salamasina complained.

"Is it about Gospel?" Daniel asked. "Have there been any more bombings?"

"No." Sherah shook her head. "We have heard nothing from Gospel."

"How is the enclave?" Daniel asked, trying to think of all the important things, which included the million exiles who lived in the asteroids.

"All my little sheep are flocking together still," Sherah answered. "Worried about you, but listening to me like they should—"

"The king sent you and Maggie and Hippo a letter!" Salamasina yelled, unable to contain the news.

"What's this? King Nebuchadnezzar? Why would he do that?" Daniel looked around the table, but his other sisters stayed silent.

"Now is not the time," Sherah scolded. "After dinner, naughty girl."

"I'll find out soon enough," Daniel said, squeezing his sister and giving her a bowl of rice. "Hippo and Sally, how are classes going? Who's been teaching since I haven't been there? I imagine Magdalene isn't helping." He winked at her.

Magdalene gave her usual answer. "You pick up my slack, not the

other way around.”

“What about the contract for the Axima moon?” Daniel asked.

“My dear son, we can get along without you for a few days. We always do.”

“But no one else is a lawyer. Have you found contact information for Te’oma yet?”

“Well, no, but now—he’s doing business on Babylon, isn’t he? I’m thinking—”

“No,” Magdalene interrupted.

“Mom, that’s right, no thinking,” Hippolyte said.

After some awkward silence Daniel said, “Someone else try picking a subject.”

His sisters talked in fits and starts. Salamasina usually talked at length about a classmate or new game, but today she just cuddled on her brother’s lap and ate her rice one grain at a time.

“Why everyone in a mood?” Daniel asked. “I think it’s time to share.”

Sherah reached behind her to a small table, grabbed something, and placed it on the table in front of Daniel. It was an expensive envelope addressed to the Rosefinch-Ravauviro family with a letter inside saying:

To all noble families exiled from their home Paradisian solar system with the worlds Gospel of John and Revelation of John: King Nebuchadnezzar of the Chaldean empire requires the attendance of Paradisians from the royal family and the nobility—young women and men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s Etemenanki palace on Babylon. We will teach them the language and literature of the Chaldean empire. Their presence is requested by the month of Sunumunna. The young women and men will be trained for three years, and after that they will enter the king’s service.

Daniel contemplated it for a few minutes, pushing his beans and rice aside and petting Salamasina on the head. “It looks like we need to leave within a couple of days because of how far we are from the Goethe Gate.” The Gate, which was a few connections away from the empire capital, was in orbit around the inhabited inner world, which would take a few weeks to reach from the asteroid field.

“No, we aren’t going,” Magdalene said. “I’m not going, and I don’t

see why you have to.”

“Birbirru said I’m too young to go,” Hippolyte said.

“Yes,” Sherah said, “a representative of the king needs to perform a set of exams, including medical. They are on Cottiae waiting for you, Daniel.” Cottiae was a close-by asteroid. Daniel sent a message to the contact on the invitation.

“It would be for the best if you failed the exams,” Magdalene said.

Sherah didn’t reprimand her eldest. But Sherah had just stuttered over whether she could contact Te’oma. If Daniel went to Babylon, he might. So his mom wanted him to go but didn’t want to overtly influence him.

“Maggie, did you purposely fail?” Daniel asked.

“No, she didn’t,” Hippolyte said when Magdalene just glared. “There isn’t a way, so she just left before it started. She’s been ornery.”

“I don’t want you to go!” Salamasina said.

“Of course not,” Daniel agreed, “but, you know, when I was your age, I had to leave Gospel. I didn’t have a choice then, and I don’t now. Wow, it’s hard to realize we’ve been here for ten years.” He hugged his sister tighter.

“So you want to go?” Salamasina whimpered.

“I want to keep you and our sisters and mom and our enclave safe, and this might be the best way.”

“No, it’s not!” Magdalene said with excitement, reaching a hand across the table. “Come with me to Revelation of John. If we don’t do as the king commands, we’ll have to leave this solar system, and I’m sure there’s a place for us in the militia.”

Daniel squeezed her hand. “I’m going to follow the rules a little bit and get the exam done. Maybe I will be disqualified, and I can stay here.”

“No, now’s the time to leave,” Magdalene insisted. “You can’t possibly want to stay here. On *asteroids*.”

“We’ve been relatively safe and comfortable,” Daniel insisted in his own way.

“Safe and comfortable? Do you hear yourself?” Magdalene asked. “This is how we lose our culture. The empire takes the best of us. If you go, you’re placing basic survival before any other value.”

“You are the best of us,” Daniel said. “Not me.”

Magdalene rolled her eyes.

“My dear daughter,” Sherah said, “what I hear you say is that we have only two options; resistance until physical death, which is all the

militia promises, or conformation until spiritual death. Do you truly see no other option?"

"There is no third option. And I choose the first; I'd rather be on the Zharqua estate or in a Revelation militia than here." She shook off Daniel's hand and left the room.

Salamasina started crying. "I don't want anyone to die."

Daniel rubbed her back, and she buried her face in his Scythian sweater.

"Well, what about you? What choice do you make?" asked Hippolyte, gesturing to Daniel.

"I think there's a third option," Daniel answered. "God would not give me visions for nothing. I can't see an easy way forward, but I have faith that this will work out."

"Is that what faith is? And we just let you go?" Hippolyte asked.

Instead of answering with words, Daniel reached a hand out to Hippolyte, which she held tight. Sherah put an arm around her. Hippolyte had spent her youngest formative years in abundance but didn't have any solid memories to grieve for what the others had lost. Magdalene and Daniel remembered their Valla Varra vineyard estate. Hippolyte didn't suffer the way the older siblings did, but she had a certain cynicism.

Daniel received a message from someone named Birbirru on Cottiae. "I need to leave now for my exams."

Sherah sighed. "This is why I wanted to wait until after dinner."

A long row of asteroids was connected like pearls on a necklace by tram from Martigny, their home asteroid, to Cottiae. If Daniel didn't want to travel by tram, there was also a reliable shuttle service.

Neither of these options was acceptable today. Daniel was too much on edge to use public transportation.

He traveled by star surfing.

His day time clothing and shoes had the shielding he needed for space travel. The Rosefinch-Ravauviro family stored helmets and gloves with their surfboards near the airlock. Daniel clicked on a helmet and a pair of gloves, and slid a board from its spot, the surface smooth and shiny in the light.

Once Daniel was outside the airlock with the surfboard attached to both feet, the gravity field of the tram line gently pulled him over. He used that force to push down the line, away from Martigny.

When he lived on Gospel, ocean wave surfing was his favorite

vacation activity. The feeling of home was echoed in the gliding and pressing against gravity while star surfing.

Being outside was not like his vision. Yes, he was tiny among the stars, but he missed the living, seeing beyond sight, the perspective of seeing the entire galaxy, but still small and fearful. Despite enjoying time with his family, reality was always translucent for a few days after a vision. Despite everything else, he held onto a core of peace and confidence.

He continued moving away from his home asteroid. He surfed from one tram track to another, making a 180 degrees upwards spin in reference to the first track, pushing against that gravity for momentum so that the gravity of the second track would catch him. This second track had stronger gravity, which gave him room to do some rolling tricks on his way. At one point, a tram sped by as he safely glided out to the edge of the gravity well. He depended on his disc to alert him of dangers. He had stuck it on his skin below his collarbone so it wouldn't get lost. It projected information through his clothes and shielding.

After a half hour, he changed from the fast track to a local track. It went parallel to the living areas of a set of asteroids connected with glass tunnels. He watched for gardens and trees. The translucent walls of one asteroid showed a mossy, humid area with a grove of miniature redwoods that he especially liked. The well-developed asteroids were like witch balls his sisters liked or tidy terrarium globes.

By the time he landed at Cottiae, he felt much more soothed.

The empire specialist had set up in a doctor's office. Daniel had to wait a half hour. Waiting at all was new to him, as he usually received rushed service since he was a member of the exiled nobility. But he was beginning a new life. Soon enough, he was brought back to a room set up with strange equipment.

"Hello, my name is Birbirru Kanasu, which is Akkadian for sparkling flower. I hope you speak Akkadian," this specialist spoke in Akkadian with a smirk. They were dressed in Scythian pants and sweaters and had purple hair in long braids.

"Yes, I do. Thank you," Daniel said awkwardly. His home language was Kahi, the common tongue in the Paradisian solar system, but he was forced to learn Akkadian in order to deal with the Chaldean empire on educational and business issues. He was conscious of his heavy accent, rolling his r's and not pronouncing consonants harshly

enough.

"I hope you'll be a better patient than either of your sisters."

"I'm sure it would be hard to be worse," Daniel smiled.

Birbirru laughed and their sly tension broke. The examinations were invasive, but they were as polite as possible. Daniel kept his dignity intact by never asserting it. They catalogued his tattoos and piercings, which included an estate tattoo of grapes on the back of a shoulder, a Martigny identification tattoo around his forearm, bands around his biceps in honor of his deceased father, and ear piercings that were traditional to men from his father's home island estate.

Their casual chatting was enjoyable, but Birbirru had an eye only for the very organic, physical, material health of his body. They wanted to wave Daniel's visions away as mere dreams. He had no traces of compounds from mushrooms or other plants to trigger a different mental state; no signs of epilepsy or other conditions associated with altered mental states; the idea of God choosing to communicate via visions was absurd to them. Birbirru was not from the Gospel of John, so Daniel didn't push them.

The visions became a sore point. They were the one issue that might keep Daniel from Babylon.

"How is the rest of your family, or enclave? Do they report similar symptoms?" Birbirru asked. "Maybe there was carbon dioxide build up that cleared out of your system." They were watching Daniel. An uncooperative noble would be information to pass on.

"No one else," Daniel answered with a gentle smile.

"I have the technology to perform a biochemical and protein survey. It would create a three-dimensional model of your brain. Do I have your permission to move forward?" Birbirru asked, still watching like a hawk.

Daniel thought about it. The empire would have some very in-depth information about him on file forever. Magdalene's frustrations and Hippolyte's warning came to mind. But if everyone in the Rosefinch-Ravauviro family failed nobility tests, what would happen?

"You may move forward with whatever you think is best."

The specialist did so. Soon, they both sat at a redwood table to review the results. "Your brain is in healthy order. There are no imbalances, or oddities, or noticeable deviations from what I consider appropriate for a Paradisian noble. There's no organic explanation for your visions."

"I am quite happy to see how healthy I am. It has quite taken a load

off my mind.”

Birbirru stared at him, wondering if he was being sarcastic. He smiled, and they relaxed.

“So you are a specialist who works for the empire?” Daniel asked. “Are you testing just my family or are there others?” He wanted more information about what was going on, but his Akkadian and formal manners were too unpracticed for him to know how to phrase things politely.

Birbirru swept their purple braids off their shoulder. “Just your family in this solar system. Other specialists are assigned to other solar systems. You are so far from the center of the empire compared to other Paradisian nobility. This was the least desirable posting. But I’m only a minor patrician. I suppose I’m lucky to work directly for the palace.” They wrinkled their nose.

“Yes, all the news we get is weeks and months old. You’ll get to leave soon.”

“And it looks like you’ll be coming with me. I’ll give you a couple more days to wrap things up.” Birbirru poked at their information disc.

Daniel’s nerves lighted with thrills and fear hearing the inevitable conclusion. “The Gate is quite a distance. Has Jumping improved at all? Have you been on a Jumping ship?” Daniel asked.

“No. Jumping is still unsafe for everyone. Empire citizens from the high courts and universities don’t have access to safe Jumping. We will stick to the Gates. Only the recently recovered ships can Jump. I had an opportunity to travel in one, but I’m glad it didn’t because we haven’t heard from it, so it’s marked as lost as the others.” They pulled on their braids and twiddled a stylus as they continued working on Daniel’s file.

The unsuccessful Jumping news disappointed Daniel. If Paradisians had a working Jumping ship, they could visit each other without the Chaldean empire monitoring them through Gate travel. More selfishly, if Birbirru had a ship right now, he could stay with his family longer.

“Let’s finish talking about your visions and then we’ll be done for the day,” Birbirru said with a smile. “Whatever passes for a day here. According to what I’m reading, your creator God supposedly gives interpretations. Have you had one for your recent vision?”

“No. In the past, a messenger from God gave me the interpretation.”

“Why not skip right to the interpretation? Why a bunch of imagery if you get the literal meaning? I thought visions were supposed to be

vague, anyway.”

“I think you’re going to remember a lion with eagle wings, right? It’s a little impressive I think. Or I’m not explaining it right.”

“Honestly, I’ve never heard of this,” Birbirru said, taking notes.

“I am a prophet.” Daniel unexpectedly felt his face get warm from blushing. He hadn’t ever said that so directly to someone outside his enclave before. “When I say that we are given visions and interpretations, I am talking about prophets. God has a specific plan for my people, Paradisians; God rescued us from Aegyptus, gave us a solar system, and has given us information that She is sending her Daughter, just as God’s Son has already been sent. But now we have to leave our Paradisian solar system for decades.”

“You haven’t left Paradise,” Birbirru snapped. “King Nebuchadnezzar has seen fit to remove the leadership so that the planets can be ruled properly. Breadbasket worlds like Gospel of John are rare and must be treasured. I thank Marduk that so many of you have voluntarily chosen exile. Fewer to kill.”

Daniel nodded. He tamped down his anger and grief. Other Paradisian prophets said that Paradise deserved the treatment, that it was punishment from the creator God, but that didn’t change that a specific empire with a specific king was choosing violence. Being angry at the king was like being angry at God or tornados and hurricanes.

Birbirru let him go and he took a tram back to Martigny. On the way home, he stopped for a visit to the asteroid with the redwood forest. He didn’t know what was waiting for him and this might be the last chance to be alone with his grief.